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ABSTRACT

Findings of three studies that investigated the extent of school restructuring in American schools are presented in this paper. The data are combined from three different sources: (1) a national survey of 268 schools nominated for their successful restructuring programs; (2) a survey of 100 restructuring proposals submitted to a funding organization; and (3) a national random sample of 377 middle schools. Schools involved in restructuring tend to make changes in four general areas--student experience, teacher experience, school governance, and school-community collaboration. Taken together, the three studies indicate that the elements of school restructuring are not being widely adopted. In the first sample cited, schools made changes in teaching techniques, but few changed their governance structures or community relationships. In the middle-school study, less ability grouping and departmentalization tended to equalize academic achievement among social classes, though the average achievement level did not increase. Three tables are included. (LMI)

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Brief to policymakers

Estimating the Extent of School Restructuring

The need for a fundamental overhaul of American schools has been articulated for many years. Numerous aspects of restructuring have been proposed, and more recently it appears that many schools are taking action on various fronts. Some of the most discussed changes involve heterogeneous grouping; small-group, cooperative learning; school-based management; parental involvement in governance; linkages to community agencies for health and social services.

How far and wide do these changes spread? How many schools reflect comprehensive restructuring as opposed to just a few innovations? With the extensive discussion of school restructuring in school boards, legislatures, and the media, it would be useful to have some estimates about actual adoption of proposed practices. Particularly innovative restructured schools, lead by unusually talented principals and teachers, are often highlighted in the popular media. Although such schools demonstrate the success of many elements of restructuring in certain situations, whether such efforts can be replicated on a large scale is less clear. Do only a small number of schools report significant restructuring, or has the movement caught on more widely?

To date, there has been no systematic survey of restructuring in the nation's schools. However, the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools has combined data from three different sources to shed some light on the question. Information of this sort can inform policymakers about the extent of reform in selected areas with selected samples of schools.

When schools work on restructuring, they tend to make changes in four general areas: 1) student experiences, 2) the professional life of teachers, 3) school governance, and 4) collaboration between schools and community. A survey of some 250 schools which were nominated to participate in a study of "restructured" schools indicates few can boast comprehensive restructuring across all four themes. The majority of the "restructured" schools have implemented changes in the first two areas only: student experiences and teachers' professional lives. This result is consistent with a second study, a survey of some 100 proposals for school restructuring submitted to a funding organization. The majority of proposals submitted by schools planned for changes in student experiences and new teaching methods, with little attention to organizational changes in school management. Thus, the intentions of practitioners as expressed in the second study are reflected in the survey of actual practice.

The above two studies include only schools which applied to participate in research on restructuring or sought special funding for restructuring in a national

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competition. We also report below on a third study which examines the extent of restructuring in a random sample of nearly 400 middle-grade schools. This survey deals mainly with the area of student experiences, and it observes 16 different changes, such as heterogeneous grouping, flexible scheduling.

"Restructured" Schools

To assemble a sample of restructured schools for the first survey, Mark Berends utilized nominations sought by the Center as potential research sites. Nominations were solicited from more than 6,000 persons and organizations, including researchers, principals, teachers, superintendents, and deans of education schools. The Center received 268 nominations. Principals of the nominated schools filled out a questionnaire and were interviewed by researchers at the Center by telephone. Information was obtained on the school's fulfillment of 38 criteria for restructuring spanning four themes. Twenty-four criteria cover the first two themes (student experiences and teachers' professional lives). For example, student experiences are altered through small group work, heterogeneous grouping, more emphasis on in-depth understanding. Teacher activities are altered by more collaborative planning and teaching, curriculum control, and parent interaction. Of the 38 criteria, less than half were frequently present, as listed in Table I. Subsequent site visits revealed that the frequency of fulfillment was only about half that concluded from in-depth interviews, i.e. in practice many schools fell short of principals' descriptors of restructuring. Berends (1992) reports that in the last two themes (governance and community cooperation), only one criterion of a possible seven in each of the themes is frequently met. So it appears that many school restructuring efforts are aimed at student and teacher experiences.

Why are the organizational and school-community interaction aspects of restructuring relatively ignored? Berends points out that changes in grouping, scheduling, and some curriculum revisions may be easier to implement than those requiring change in authority or coordination with external groups or agencies. Social or political barriers might inhibit the more structural overhaul indicated by the last two themes. This shows the difficulties of large scale restructuring when we recall that the sample of 268 schools is a select group nominated for what they see as successful restructuring efforts.

Schools' Proposals

Further insight into the extent of school restructuring is provided by a study of Doug Archbald of the University of Delaware and Jo Anne Deshon of West Park Elementary School, Delaware, Pennsylvania. In 1990, the RJR Nabisco Foundation solicited proposals for school reform. The Foundation encouraged fundamental reform, and placed no constraints on the subject matter of the proposals. Sixteen hundred proposals were received by November, 1990. Archbald and Deshon examined a random sub-sample of 106 proposals for their study. This presented the researchers with the restructuring goals and program plans of teachers and principals. It is these practitioners who will actually restructure schools. Their aspirations should indicate which areas will be implemented and which bypassed.

Archbald and Deshon (1992) identify the main problems enunciated by the practitioners and the main solutions proposed. About two-thirds of the proposers defined school problems in the area of student experience. Most of the problems related to disadvantaged students. Proposers spoke of problems such as low self-esteem, low motivation, deficient basic skills, and latch-key children. The most common inadequacy cited is curriculum and instruction, especially the lack of sufficient individualization, the dearth of hands-on learning, and the scarcity of computers.

After student experiences, the next most cited problem area (16%) is the teacher's professional life, mainly the lack of time for reform. As in Berends' study, the last two categories of organizational restructuring are nearly absent. Does this simply reflect the grant proposer's desire to emphasize the most visible educational needs, or perhaps a reluctance to upset the organizational status quo?

TABLE I: Restructuring Criteria Most Frequently Met in Selected Schools

Information comes from principals of schools nominated to participate in a study of restructured schools (Berends, 1992). There were a total of 13 criteria in student experiences, 11 in professional life of teachers, 7 in governance, and 7 in community coordination. "Most frequently met" refers to at least 80% of principals surveyed answering "yes" on their questionnaire, and at least 40% of responses confirmed through telephone interview.

Principal Questionnaire	% Yes	Follow-up Interview	% Yes
Student Experiences		***Student Experiences***	
Heterogeneous Grouping	92%	Heterogeneous Grouping	55%
Small Group and Individual Instruction	88%	Small Group and Individual Instruction	57%
Integrated Disciplines	87%		
Students Using Full Sentences	84%		
Depth of Understanding	82%	Depth of Understanding	44%
Peer Tutoring	81%		
		Knowledge Production	42%
		Flexible Learning Time	40%
Professional Life of Teachers		***Professional Life of Teachers***	
Staff Design of Staff Development	93%	Staff Design of Staff Development	61%
Work with Parents and Human Services	89%		
Differentiated Roles	86%	Differentiated Roles	51%
Collegial Planning	84%	Collegial Planning	48%
Control over Curriculum & Policy	84%	Control over Curriculum & Policy	57%
Small Group and Individual Instruction	84%	Small Group and Individual Instruction	53%
		Flexible Time Periods	42%
Governance		***Governance***	
No criteria met by 80% of schools.		School Site Control	52%
		School Council	42%
Community Coordination		***Community Coordination***	
Coordination with other agencies	82%	Coordination with other agencies	43%
		Parent Involvement	46%
Sample Size	268	Sample Size	188

Interestingly, the proposals contained many negative comments regarding regulation and bureaucracy. Yet they did not exploit the opportunity to address these problem areas.

The practitioners proposed plentiful strategies aimed at the insufficient educational experiences of at-risk students: tutorial programs, increased school day and year, more social support, more problem-solving and science activities. In spite of the focus on students in these proposals, the researchers note a surprising lack of emphasis on building more challenging, in-depth curriculum.

Restructuring in Student Experiences - Schools at Large

Valerie Lee and Julia Smith, of the University of Michigan, examine the effects of restructuring on student achievement and engagement. As part of that study, they assembled data on the prevalence of restructuring in American middle schools. The

TABLE II: Measures of School Restructuring *

Restructuring Features	Percent of Schools
No homogeneously grouped classes	17%
Flexible time scheduling	21%
Team teaching in 8th grade	40%
Students have same homeroom teacher all middle grade years	24%
Scheduled common planning time for department members or teaching teams	36%
Staff development program available	57%
Semi-departmentalization or self-contained classes	12%
8th graders keeps same classmates for all classes	18%
Students from different grade levels are in the same classroom	37%
8th graders are not retained	12%
Interdisciplinary teachers share the same students	51%
More than 40% of students not academically grouped	11%
Has schools within the school	14%
8th grade classes are organized for cooperative learning	31%
8th graders have exploratory classes	50%
8th graders do special projects regularly in their curriculum	64%

* National sample of schools with eighth grade (Lee & Smith, 1992)

TABLE III: Restructuring Characteristics Appearing in Schools

Number of Restructuring Characteristics	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
None	43	4.1%
1-5	462	44.6%
6-8	360	34.7%
9-12	139	13.4%
13-16	9	.9%
Other	24	*

*2.3% missing

Note: When these frequencies are adjusted to represent the demographic characteristics of all schools with eighth grade, the percent of schools engaging in some restructuring increases modestly.

National Center for Educational Statistics sponsored a general survey (NELS:88) of 25,000 eighth grade students in 1,037 schools. Lee and Smith used a sub-sample of 377 schools and 8,845 students in Catholic, independent, and public schools.

They identify 16 characteristics, mainly in the area of student experiences, which could be explored with the NELS survey of 1988 and tabulated the percentage of schools which satisfy each criterion (Table II). Since NELS:88 is a survey of written responses from school principals, one may wonder if, as found in the Berends study, the numbers may be an overestimate of the actual changes in schools. We see in the two studies mentioned above that even where restructuring is taking hold, for the most part it is doing so in a piecemeal way. It is difficult to find schools in the nation that have comprehensively restructured.

These three studies, taken together, indicate that the elements of school restructuring are not being widely adopted. Both the number of participating schools and numbers of restructuring areas is still small. In the select sample, schools attempting restructuring make changes in teaching techniques, but negligibly few schools are embarking upon changes in governance and relationships with the larger community.

Research on the effects of restructuring on student performance has begun. For example, Lee and Smith observe some positive correlation between restructuring and achievement, but the relationship is modest and the study did not involve controls for prior achievement.

They find that less ability grouping and departmentalization tends to equalize achievement between different social classes, although the average level of achievement does not increase. More dramatic effects might require more comprehensive restructuring. For this to occur, schools and parents will need to be persuaded of the need for restructuring, and then given the necessary resources to proceed.

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CENTER MISSION

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools will study how organizational features of schools can be changed to increase the intellectual and social competence of students. The five-year program of research focuses on restructuring in four areas: the experiences of students in school; the professional life of teachers; the governance, management and leadership of schools; and the coordination of community resources to better serve educationally disadvantaged students.

Through syntheses of previous research, analyses of existing data, and new empirical studies of education reform, the Center will focus on six critical issues for elementary, middle and high schools: How can schooling nurture authentic forms of student achievement? How can schooling enhance educational equity? How can decentralization and local empowerment be constructively developed? How can schools be transformed into communities of learning? How can change be approached through thoughtful dialogue and support rather than coercion and regulation? How can the focus on student outcomes be shaped to serve these five principles?

CENTER PUBLICATIONS

In the fall and spring of each year, the Center publishes an issue report which offers in-depth analysis of critical issues in school restructuring, distributed free to all persons on the mailing list. In addition, three "briefs" targeted to special audiences will be offered yearly. Our 1992 bibliography, currently available, will be updated each year and is distributed free on request. Occasional papers reporting results of Center research will be available at cost. To be placed on the mailing list and receive *Issues in Restructuring Schools*, please contact Karen Prager, Dissemination Coordinator, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, University of Wisconsin, 1025 W. Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706. Telephone: (608) 263-7575.

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This information indicates that, in spite of plentiful rhetoric and extensive initiatives by districts, states, and national organizations, the restructuring movement has yet to touch the mass of American schools in any significant way. Even in the most selective sample, less than half of those restructured schools are pursuing major elements of restructuring. In the larger sample, elements of restructuring are pursued much less frequently. In considering initiatives in the future, policymakers may want to consider why so few schools seem to have changed significantly in response to all the initiatives thus far.

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